

WHITE HOUSE DAILY BRIEFING TRANSCRIPT

Monday, March 7, 2016

EARNEST:

It is. We're in good shape, today. Good afternoon, everybody. Happy Monday. Let me do one statement at the top and then, Kevin, we'll go to your questions.

For the last few months, we've been talking about the Zika virus and highlighting the concern that this administration has about the potential for spread of that disease in the United States. Today, Dr. Tom Friedman, who is the director of the Centers for Disease Control, will be in Puerto Rico as part of a three-day visit to assess firsthand CDC's support for the Zika response on the island.

While we have not yet seen the transmission of Zika by mosquito within the continental United States, spread of the virus in Puerto Rico has been a cause for concern. As of March 4, the end of last week, 160 cases of Zika virus infection in Puerto Rico had been reported to the CDC, and based on the previous history of diseases spread by the same type of mosquito, thousands of Puerto Ricans could become infected this year alone.

EARNEST:

Dr. Friedman's trip will emphasize the need for preparedness and prevention to reduce the public health impact of the Zika outbreak in Puerto Rico with a focus on reducing the risk of Zika virus to pregnant women who, as we have said, are the most at-risk population. You'll recall that our concern with the Zika virus is that it is apparently linked to a particular birth. That link is currently under scientific review to determine exactly what the linkage is and how -- how powerful it is.

And, you know, for most of the population, this virus is not a threat. About one in five people who contract the Zika virus will not even -- about only one in five people who contract Zika the virus will have symptoms, most people won't. But our concern is about pregnant women contracting the virus and potentially having some pregnancy complications as a result.

Mindful of this risk, this administration, about a month ago, laid out a package of legislative proposals, essentially funding requests, that would be helpful in fighting the disease here in the United States. We put forward specific language and specific line items to Congress two weeks ago now, and unfortunately, we have seen very little in the way of congressional action on this. The only response really has been to suggest that the administration take money from other accounts to supplement this effort.

The suggestion by some has even been made that the government should take away money that currently is being used to protect the American people from Ebola to fight Zika. Now, we have allowed that there may be some ways where there are some funds that are available that could be moved to address Zika that would not undermine the fight against Ebola, because that obviously continues to be a priority.

But that is not a sufficient response to this significant challenge, but if we want to continue to do work related to vaccines, if we wanted to continue to do work to develop diagnostics, there are also other public health steps that we can take and essentially rapid response teams that could respond to reports of someone contracting the disease. There also are, you know, significant efforts related to vector control. This is essentially trying to target the population of mosquitoes that we know transmits the virus.

So there is a significant need here and we need Congress to act, and unfortunately, the reception on Capitol Hill has been consistent with the kind of response that we've seen from Republicans on a range of other -- from Republicans in Congress on a range of other priorities, including the budget. And that essentially is not registering some concerns, not after effectively engaging with the administration to find a solution, rather we've seen Republicans -- many of them either ignore the request or declared dead on arrival without even considering it.

That is not consistent with a government -- a majority party that has embraced their responsibility to govern, and that's bad for the country and it certainly explains a good portion of the rather low regard that the American public has for the current United States Congress. So when it comes to something as significant and important to our public health and our national security as Zika, we shouldn't let it get broken down along party lines.

We'd like to see Congress act in genuine bipartisan fashion to do the right thing for the country, and they should be able to do this without allowing more narrow political considerations to interfere.

So with that, Kevin, let's go to your questions.

QUESTION:

Josh, before you go on...

EARNEST:

Sure.

QUESTION:

Remind us how -- how much the administration was seeking?

EARNEST:

The request is for about \$1.9 billion. And we put out a fact sheet sort of itemizing where those resources would be dedicated. These are -- again, these are things like vector control, public health resources that would allow us to quickly respond to reports of an outbreak. There also is more research that can be done around vaccines, as well as development of diagnostic tools that would

allow people to quickly understand whether or not they've contracted the virus so that they can take the necessary steps to protect themselves and their families.

So we can get -- so we can get you that fact sheet that has more details about how exactly that money would be used. OK?

Kevin?

QUESTION:

Just one quick question along those lines. Since Ebola is no longer the public health threat that it was, what's wrong with taking some of the money that you had dedicated toward it and direct it toward confronting the Zika virus?

EARNEST:

Well, I think there are a couple of things. The first is, there -- what our public health experts tell us is that we need to make sure that we follow through in -- in combating that disease. So you're right, the threat is not nearly as urgent from Ebola as it was back in 2014. I think the point that this administration has made is we need to prepare responsibly for these kinds of outbreaks. That's critical to our national security and waiting until there is widespread transmission of the disease or a genuine threat of a pandemic is too late.

So we know that there's more that we -- that we need to do to build up the public health infrastructure in some other countries to make sure that they can try to prevent the spread of the disease which makes it harder and less likely to -- to make its way to our shores. We know now - - this is a -- this is part of our experience from Ebola -- for a while, it was a little hard to make a public case to all of you and to the American people that somehow investing in the public health infrastructure of another country benefited from the American people.

But our experience with Ebola brought that issue to the floor and in a way that I think is instructive for us to understand why confronting public health risks before they arrive in the United States is critical to our national security. I think everybody has learned that lesson, unfortunately except for Congress, who is suggesting that we should take away resources from that effort in a way that could undermine our ability to finish the job.

So as I said, there may be certain areas where we can take money from these Ebola accounts without undermining our ability to finish the job there. But to suggest that we can fight the Zika virus just by taking all the money that we use to fight Ebola, that would be both unwise in terms of finishing the fight against Ebola, but also would under-resource the significant effort that we have in mind to try to protect the American people from Zika.

QUESTION:

So what are the plans of the White House when it comes to who will attend Nancy Reagan's funeral?

EARNEST:

Well, it's my understanding that the -- well, let me start by saying -- you saw the -- the written comments from the president and first lady that we issued yesterday in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of Mrs. Reagan's passing. And I think many of you had the opportunity to see and hear from the president in the Roosevelt Room today where he talked about her legacy and her memory.

So obviously, I think that's an indication that Mrs. Reagan's family is on the -- is on the minds of everybody here at the White House, including the president and first lady, as we know they mourn the loss of Mrs. Reagan.

EARNEST:

It is my understanding is that the planning for her funeral arrangements are underway. And so, once those arrangements are settled and announced, we'll be able to begin working on determining who from the White House would represent the administration at her funeral. So we'll keep you posted on that.

QUESTION:

Thank you.

QUESTION:

At the debate last night between the Democratic candidates and in response to the Flint water crisis, the candidates talked about the governor. They voiced support for the governor resigning or being recalled. Does the White House agree with that assessment.

EARNEST:

Well, I see that some of the coverage was animated by then. Look, what we have said are a couple of things. The first is that there are a couple of investigations to try to get to the bottom of what exactly happened in Flint. What decisions were made and by whom? Did they follow the proper protocol?

And I know at least one of those investigations is an independent investigation by the U.S. attorney there in Michigan. So I've regularly been hesitant to weigh in too aggressively in terms of assigning blame, knowing that this is something that a variety of agencies are taking a look at.

What our administration has been focused on is trying to address the significant problem that exists right now in Flint. And that means trying to support the state and local officials who are primarily responsible for responding to this incident.

So, there are a number of things this administration has done over the last week or so to indicate our support for those ongoing efforts. And that includes things like committing to expand Medicaid coverage and services for Flint residents. On Wednesday of last week, the Department of Health and Human Services announced an allotment of \$3.5 million in emergency funds to expand head-start in Michigan.

And I know that the EPA administrator was also there last week where the EPA awarded a grant that would allow for additional, through testing of the water in Flint to try to inspire confidence in the residents in that community and the safety of their water supply.

Understandably, that confidence has been shaken. So, the more work that we can do to continue to thoroughly test the water there would be beneficial. The other thing I think that's relevant is the EPA administrator -- this is obviously goes far beyond the situation in Flint, but the EPA administrator sent a letter to governors across the country outlining how they can enhance oversight of the so-called Lead and Copper rule.

And this would ensure that state and local authorities and other jurisdictions are not taking their eye off the ball when it comes to prioritizing the safety of the water supply. And you know, to put it more bluntly, the EPA is focused on making sure that what happened Flint doesn't happen anywhere else.

And that's I think what would explain the robust communication on the part of EPA to governors and local officials all across the country about making the enforcement of the Lead and Copper Rule a top priority. OK? All right.

EARNEST:

Roberta?

QUESTION:

What kind of questions and concerns is the White House hearing from foreign counterparts about some of the things that Donald Trump is saying on the campaign trail?

EARNEST:

Well, I don't have any details of private conversations to share with you.

I think I'll just say, in general, that, you know, we've -- on a number of occasions had an opportunity to express our significant concerns with some of the divisive rhetoric that has been uttered on the campaign trail, not just by Mr. Trump, but by a variety of Republican candidates for president.

You know, many of those declarative statements are in direct conflict with basic American values, the kinds of values that were critical to the founding of this nation, and values that have long been cherished by generations of Americans.

And I think the observation that I would make is just simply that, other countries are watching. The leaders of other countries are watching, the populations of other countries are watching.

And part of a presidential campaign is to demonstrate to the American people, who ultimately will be doing the choosing here, that you have the aptitude to lead the country. And that means being a faithful messenger when it comes to articulating the values of the country.

That's what it -- that's certainly an important part of what it means to be presidential. And I think all too often on the campaign trail, a number of Republican candidates have, at least in my view, fallen quite short of that.

QUESTION:

I wanted to ask you about something that came up in the debate last night. Today, the NRA is saying that Senator Sanders was spot on in his comments about gun manufacturer liability.

And I'm wondering what the White House thought of those comments and whether the White House has a position on that proposed law?

EARNEST:

Well, I -- I've seen some of this reporting; I did not see the debate itself.

So, I'll leave it to Senator Sanders to make clear what his position is. The clearest enunciation that I've seen of his position that we've discussed in this briefing room a couple of months ago was his declaration that he supported changes to that 2005 legislation that significantly limited gun manufacturer liability.

You know, the president has suggested that those kinds of changes that Senator Sanders previously expressed support for are the kind of common sense changes the president has in mind when he talks about common sense steps the Congress could take to make our communities safer and to reduce gun violence.

Or to at least make some incidents of gun violence a little less likely. We can take those kinds of steps, including amending this law, in a way that doesn't undermine the basic constitutional rights of law-abiding Americans.

So, again, if Senator Sanders has changed his position on this, you should go ask him, and he can explain to you what his position is. But we've certainly been clear about what our position is.

OK? Mary.

QUESTION:

Following up on Roberta's (ph) question. In an interview today, the Mexican president said that Donald Trump is hurting the United States' relationship with Mexico.

Does the president agree? Are Trump's comments hurting that relationship?

EARNEST:

Well, I'll -- I didn't see those specific comments. Obviously, the president of Mexico is allowed to draw his own conclusions.

Obviously, President Obama has devoted significant time and energy to working to strengthen our relationship with Mexico, that has included confronting the consequences of our broken immigration system, that has included making an historic investment in border security.

EARNEST:

Obviously, the United States worked closely with Mexico to try to address a surge in unaccompanied minors at the Southwest border, and we obviously have been able to work effectively with the Mexicans on that issue.

But there are a range of other issues where we've been able to coordinate effectively too, including on the Transpacific Partnership. So the kinds of national security and economic ties between the United States and Mexico are critical to the strength of our economy and our national security.

That's why the president has invested so deeply in them, and our country's interests have been advanced as a result. And certainly the next president, whomever -- whoever that happens to be, will have to do the same thing. And, you know, but ultimately, I'll let President Pena Nieto offer up his own assessment of the state of Republican politics.

QUESTION:

And on Flint, you said rather than assigning blame, you want to focus more on the current response. What's your response, then, to Senators Lee and Vitter, their effort to hold up this Senate bill to provide funding for Flint? Senator Lee says federal aid is not needed at this time, that they have a large rainy day fund to address these issues.

EARNEST:

Well again, I don't see why this needs to be a partisan issue because I'm not sure that the Republican governor of Michigan would agree with that assessment. I know that there are some Republican members of Congress from Michigan who don't agree with that assessment.

But look, the view of the White House is that there is an important role for Congress to play here, and that, you know, offering support to the people of Flint as they deal with this difficult situation is important. It certainly is an important -- is a priority for the administration.

We have devoted significant resources that I've just outlined to try to meet some of their immediate needs. I think what the legislation has in mind is trying to address some of the longer-term challenges that are plaguing the water system in Flint. That certainly is an appropriate role for Congress to play, and it's unfortunate that we've seen some Republicans stand up and try to block that necessary funding.

OK, Tolu (ph).

QUESTION:

I wanted to ask you about the meeting that the president had with financial regulators earlier today. Apparently, he said that if Democrats or Republicans are doing anything to undermine Dodd-Frank that voters should hold them to account. And I wanted to ask about the DNC Chair, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, her position on the payday regulation that the consumer protection agency is about to put out. She is joining with Republicans saying that that regulation should be delayed and each state that has its own regulation should trump whatever the federal agency puts out.

So I was hoping to get the White House -- White House's position on that and what you think on whether or not she would be one of the people who's looking to undermine that part of Dodd-Frank.

EARNEST:

Well Tolu, I have to admit I'm not aware of this pending regulation from the CFPB, and I'm not aware of Congresswomen Wasserman Schultz's position on it. I'll just say in general that our expectation is -- well, let me say it this way.

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau was established by the Wall Street Reform bill because...

(AUDIO GAP)

EARNEST:

... on K Street to represent them in Congress and to represent them in Washington, D.C. The president felt it was important to have an empowered agency in place to independently represent middle class families in Washington, D.C., and that's exactly what the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau does. It's why the president is proud to have presided over the creation of that independent organization, and he's been strongly supportive of the work that Mr. Cordray and others have done to look out for middle class families.

EARNEST:

And so I don't have a comment on any pending regulations they may be considering. You can check with them on that. But the president certainly is enthusiastic about the important work that they have already done to advocate for consumers in Washington, D.C.

QUESTION:

(OFF-MIKE) ask you about trade. At the debate -- the Democratic debate yesterday, trade was a big topic, and there didn't seem to be -- seem to be anyone standing up for the president's trade policy. There actually seemed to be a lot of negativity about trade and how it's taken out the middle class in Flint and other places like that.

On the Republican side, you're also seeing candidates basically say that the president's ideas on trade aren't -- aren't gonna help the middle class. So I'm wondering -- does the president plan to stick to this -- you know, stand out and talk about his trade policy, and advocate for TPP? Because on the campaign trail, there's no one really -- actually doing that.

EARNEST:

Well, you know, Tolu (ph), we had -- this -- there was -- this was the subject of some discussion last summer, as Congress was working to pass Trade Promotion Authority legislation that would allow the president to essentially complete the negotiations around the TPP.

And there was a lot of discussion at the time about how, on the campaign trail -- that candidates in both parties were critical of Trade Promotion Authority legislation, because that essentially was a proxy for a referendum on the wisdom of moving forward with the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Despite that opposition on the campaign trail, the president did succeed in working with Republicans in Congress to build a bipartisan majority in both the House and the Senate to get that bill passed.

We're looking to build the same kind of coalition to ratify the Trans-Pacific Partnership. And, look, the crux of the argument in the mind of the president essentially comes down to this: there's no denying that the broader economic forces of globalization have hit some communities pretty hard. Flint's probably a pretty good example of that.

There are other communities across the country that have faced some significant headwinds and seen significant chunks of the economy fade away because of the inexorable forces of globalization.

So the president's view is, well, what are we gonna do about that? And we certainly hear a lot of criticism and, I think, legitimate concern about what impact globalization has on middle-class families. But the president actually is putting forward a -- a proposal to address it.

The president is suggesting that what we should do is we should basically go out and tell other countries -- particularly those countries that have economies that are rather dynamic and interested in doing business in the United States, that they can only do business in the United States if they raise their labor standards, if they raise their environmental standards.

If they start abiding by commonly viewed or commonly observed standards when it comes to human rights -- that by engaging in the world and telling other countries that, if they want to do business in the United States, they need to start to level the playing field, that actually will be good for American workers. That will be good for American businesses. That will be good for our economy.

And the other thing is we're also going to tell them that if you want to do business in the United States, not only do you have to raise those standards, you also need to allow the United States and our businesses and our employees to do business in your country, too.

That's significant, because again, many of these countries actually have rather -- rather dynamic economies that are growing rapidly. And one of the chief selling points of the Trans-Pacific Partnership is that it would cut 18,000 taxes that are currently imposed by other countries on goods that are stamped, "Made in the USA".

EARNEST:

So the president actually has a -- a strategy and a proposal for confronting those forces of globalization that have had a negative impact on communities across the country. And that's worthy of some debate, and the president is -- is eager to make that case wherever and whenever he can to try to get Congress to ratify this agreement so we can get to work cutting those taxes and raising those standards and doing the kinds of things that we know will be good for the broader U.S. economy and for middle class families in this country.

QUESTION:

Fairly new news that the White House is going to be putting out every year an annual report about drone checks and accompanying combatants and non-combatants and civilians that are killed each year in those. Do you have anything on that, when -- how soon might we see the first report on that? How far back might it back? Any details that you can share?

EARNEST:

Well, the president's top counterterrorism adviser, Lisa Monaco is giving a speech on this topic right now. And in the context of that speech, she did announce that the administration will, consistent with the president's priority that he's placed on transparency, provide a more regular report for disclosing the results of counterterrorism operations that include specific numbers about extremists and terrorists that were taken off the battle field and those individuals that were killed in the operation that were not part of the target.

And that you'll recall that particularly for -- throughout the president's second term in office, that he has been working to try to take these kinds of programs that are critical to our national security and where possible, be more transparent about them.

Because the president's view is that the American public and the world can have greater confidence in the success and the effectiveness of these programs to fight terrorism if we're more transparent about them.

There are obviously limitations on that, but there's more that we can do, particularly when it comes to assessing the outcomes of these operations. So, for a more cogent and detailed explanation of what our plans are, I'd refer you to Ms. Monaco's speech.

This is obviously something that she's devoted a significant portion of her White House career to working on. And so, this news that we're announcing I think, is good news and is certainly as a credit to her skill and professionalism that this is a positive step that we're able to take. OK?

Chris.

QUESTION:

Josh, last week, House Minority Leader, Nancy Pelosi and the DNC super delegate system, saying that it shouldn't hold sway over who should be the Democratic presidential nominee. The president had to endure the system in 2008 when he was first running. It's a system we have in 2016 for both of the current candidates. Does he share the concern about the super delegates?

EARNEST:

I haven't heard the president weigh in with an opinion on this. Obviously, these are rules that are determined every four years by the Democratic National Committee and there's a long process in play, leading up to the Democratic convention for determining how those delegates of that convention will be selected.

But I haven't heard the president express a specific opinion on this plan, so I'd refer you to DNC.

QUESTION:

Do you think it was starting out, since the (ph) system (ph) credit him in 2008?

EARNEST:

Well, again, I -- those were the rules that everybody understood when they signed up to enter the race back in 2007 and 2008. And everybody knew the rules when they got into the race in 2016 as well. And there is a public mechanism for having an impact on those rules if you want to get engaged in the process, the DNC, at least when I worked there, was committed to the transparent examination of these rules and gave people the opportunity to -- at least gave members the opportunity to weigh in on them.

So, if people have concerns with that process, I'd encourage them to take those concerns to the DNC and try to have them addressed in advance of the 2020 convention.

QUESTION:

One more question on another issue out of -- Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau visiting the White House this week.

He has pledged to march in the Toronto LGBT Pride Parade in July, and that would make him the (inaudible) first Canadian prime minister to march in an LGBT pride parade.

In the president's last year in office, would he be open to marching in an LGBT pride parade some place in the country, like here in D.C. in June?

EARNEST:

I have not heard of a presidential commitment like that. My guess is it would not be the first time that he has marched in a pride parade.

QUESTION:

It would be as president.

EARNEST:

Probably as president, but not the first time that he has done that.

But I don't have scheduling updates for you at this point. But if that's something the president chooses to do, we'll definitely let you know.

Ron.

QUESTION:

The Supreme Court, anything new? Can you characterize in anyway where the president is in his thinking? Has he narrowed the field, is the field still open, is -- we're going to have an announcement this afternoon?

EARNEST:

Well, stay tuned.

I'm just kidding. There will not be an announcement.

(LAUGHTER)

I do not expect any news on this today. The president did devote a significant portion of his weekend to working on this and reviewing materials that his team had prepared for him about potential candidates.

The president also spent a portion of his time this weekend talking on the phone with members of the United States Senate. He made a number of other calls; I don't have specific names to share with you, but there were multiple individual conversations between the president of the United States and members of the United States Senate.

That, I think, should underscore you -- underscore for you the priority that the president places on consulting with the Senate.

This kind of consultation is what led the president to invite Leader McConnell and Chairman Grassley and their Democratic counterparts to the Oval Office last week.

And the president believes that these kinds of conversations in advance of choosing a nominee are consistent with the expectations of the American people and of the United States Constitution. And...

QUESTION:

Have you seen anything in recent days that gives you more -- a higher expectation that this is going to move forward?

Have you heard anything from these conversations -- has the president heard anything in these conversations? You know, you talked about the polls of the public supports your point of view on this.

Is there anything changing out there, do you think?

EARNEST:

Well, I -- that is hard to assess. I mean, look, I think the -- there have been a number of polls that have come out in the last couple of weeks I do think that indicate a significant portion of the American people agree that the Senate should fulfill their constitutional duty to give the president's nominee a fair hearing and a timely yes or no vote.

We certainly take heart in that. But I haven't noticed a significant change in the polls, but I think it's pretty good news that the polls indicate that most people agree with the president on this. So, that part is good.

I mean, the thing that I did notice, I know that -- I notice that former Senate majority leader -- Senate Republican Leader Trent Lott had some comments on this over the weekend, or maybe they were released today, where, you know, he said something that I thought was pretty important.

He said, "My attitude, particularly on the Supreme Court was that elections do have consequences, sometimes bad, and I tend to lean toward being supportive of the president's nominees, Democrat or Republican."

That's exactly the approach that senators have traditionally taken to considering these kinds of nominations. It's why the Republican refusal to even consider any nominee that the president would put forward is inconsistent with recent precedent, it's inconsistent with their Constitutional responsibilities and something that the American people don't support.

EARNEST:

You know, I did note -- and I don't have this part of the quote here -- but I did note that Former Senator Lott continued saying that he expected that the -- that the Judiciary Committee would probably hear -- have a hearing for the president's nominee, so maybe he sense that something is changing out there. We'll have to -- we'll have to see whether or not that materializes.

QUESTION:

Just one more. You mentioned that the -- the funding request for Zika two weeks ago went nowhere in Congress. We know Gitmo seems to be going nowhere in Congress, we know the budget was - - seemed to be going nowhere. Is there anywhere where you think you're going to see some progress in terms of trying to move your agenda forward in the short term?

What can we look for, what's going to happen that you're optimistic about, because I guess there's feeling out there about whether or not the administration is really just sort of stuck and not moving forward. You mentioned, I think, about six or seven issue areas some time ago...

EARNEST:

Yeah.

QUESTION:

...and I don't think we've seen much there, or have we? Did I miss something?

EARNEST:

Well look, I think the case that you have heard from me regularly has been that we've seen a Republican majority in the United States refuse to embrace their responsibility to govern the country, that they've been employing obstructionist tactics so consistently over the first six years of President Obama's tenure in the White House that they have not shifted gears to actually try and lead the country.

And, you know, some people have, I think, made an appropriate link to what's happening in the Republican presidential primary, that at the same time that you see Republicans in Congress refuse to do anything, even things that are pretty non-partisan like ensuring that the government has the resources necessary to protect the country from Zika, they're also bemoaning that a candidate who doesn't really stand for anything and certainly doesn't stand for many principles that are important to the Republican Party, is building a lot of support among Republican voters.

And it's sort of consistent with this thing that I said before, that look, if you don't stand for something, your voters are going to fall for anything. And that's exactly what's happened on the Republican side, and it's not just these more recent issues, I think all of which are relevant that you've raised, but this goes back to health care reform, where Republicans have voted 60 times to repeal the Democratic -- to repeal Obamacare without offering up their own Republican alternative. The same thing relates to immigration reform where you have bipartisan legislation that was blocked from even coming up for a vote in the House of Representatives, but no Republican alternative was proposed.

So -- and the same -- the same could be said for gun safety legislation. So...

QUESTION:

So you're -- so you're arguing that all of that is responsible in part for the rise of Donald Trump?

EARNEST:

I think I'm not the only person arguing that, I think a lot of people are, and a lot of Republicans are. And, you know, ultimately, this is a choice that they have to make. Are they going to embrace their responsibility to lead the country?

Here's the thing. This is not a new or unexpected responsibility, Leader McConnell wrote an op-ed that appeared in the Wall Street Journal the day after the mid-term elections saying now we can get Congress moving again. We haven't seen much evidence of that, at least this year. Instead, what we have seen is not just opposition to the president's proposals, but a refusal to even engage on them, a refusal to even engage on Gitmo, a refusal to engage on the budget. They canceled the budget hearings before the president even rolled out his budget proposal.

I'll note -- pardon me, I'll note that Senate Republicans announced today that they're going to have to put off for another month their efforts to draft a budget. So it's not clear exactly what it is that they're doing. I think what -- but the result of that is that you have a Democratic president who's not on the ballot in 2016, who's not focused on politics, but actually trying to govern the country do -- try to do the right thing, including filling a vacancy on the Supreme Court.

EARNEST:

And what you see from Republicans in the Senate, who vowed to use their majority to get Congress moving again, to actually not do anything and not use the gears of government to even obstruct

the president, because that would be problematic enough, they're actually not even doing anything. And I think that is -- I think that would explain both Donald Trump's standing in the polls, but also the Republican leaders in Congress, and their standing in the polls. Congress is held in fairly low regard these days. I think there's a -- there's a reason for that.

OK? Rich.

QUESTION:

Thanks, Josh. The president just said in this Wall Street meeting (ph) that it is popular to suggest that nothing has happened in regards to fixing the financial regulatory system. He calls that political rhetoric.

Last evening, we watched a Democratic debate in which it was a relentless demonizing of Wall Street -- perhaps even suggesting that much more need to be done to rein in Wall Street. Is that the type of rhetoric that he's talking about -- the president?

EARNEST:

Well, I think what the president has in mind is -- is making sure that people understand the facts of what's happened. Since Wall Street reform was passed, we have, in a complicated, fast-moving environment that is the modern financial system, put in place rules and regulations that would reduce the risk that U.S. taxpayers face.

That's a substantial accomplishment, and we've done all of that at the same time that our economy has experienced a strong recovery from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

We're currently in the midst of the longest consecutive streak of private-sector job growth in our nation's history. Over the last six years or so, the economy has created more than 14 million jobs.

And at the same time, we've been able to put in protections that make our financial system more stable and ensure that taxpayers aren't gonna be on the hook for bailing out financial solutions whose risky bets go bad. So...

QUESTION:

Then why did we hear so much in Democratic debates -- the president's party -- about Wall Street -- the need to rein it in and -- and address it?

EARNEST:

Well, I think part of it is that there are -- are people who are frustrated about the fact that -- you know, in the aftermath of the economic downturn, that many financial institutions have benefited from that recovery quite well.

And there are a variety of ways to measure that. You see -- you know, large financial solutions reporting record profits on a regular basis. You know, we've seen remarkable growth in the value of the stock market. There are a variety of ways to measure it, and I think a lot of people across the country want to make sure that middle-class families are -- are benefiting too.

And the president's certainly focused on that, and that's why so much of the Recovery Act, for example, was -- was focused on making sure that middle-class families would benefit from tax cuts and other things.

So look, the -- the president's focused on making sure that middle-class families get access to expanded economic opportunity in this country. That's been a priority when it comes to domestic policymaking, and there certainly is more that we can and should do.

And that's why he's looking forward to advocating for the Democratic nominee for president who understands that we need to build on the progress that we've made over the last seven years.

QUESTION:

March 17th is a deadline for whether or not the Administration will (ph) label ISIS as perpetrators of genocide. Any -- and update on that?

EARNEST:

I don't have any update on that. Obviously this is something that lawyers at the State Department are taking a close look at. This designation is something that requires -- you know, a rather precise interpretation of the law.

EARNEST:

But that certainly does not undermine how seriously we take the atrocities that have been committed by ISIL in Iraq and in Syria. We have seen people be targeted because they are a minority -- either a religious and ethnic or racial minority, and this administration has taken aggressive steps to protect religious minorities in Iraq in Syria. We've expressed our concern on a number of occasions about Christians being targeted by ISIL because of their religious views.

The president has described that as effectively an assault on all people of faith. So the president takes that very seriously and there's even military action the president has ordered to try to protect religious minorities and -- so this is something the president takes quite seriously. But as relates to the genocide designation, that's something that State Department attorneys will have to take a close look at and I don't want to get ahead of -- or interfere in their process.

QUESTION:

Will it mean the deadline, do you believe? The State Department...

EARNEST:

You'll have to check with the State Department about that.

QUESTION:

Josh?

EARNEST:

OK?

QUESTION:

And finally, does -- with the Supreme Court vacancy, does the vacancy specifically, and I'm saying this is for Justice Scalia's vacancy, but if it were another Supreme Court justice who left the court for some reason, does the nominee -- does the vacancy change the nominee at all? If another justice were to leave, would that influence who the president would select?

EARNEST:

The president is conducting his search for the -- for a nominee to fill the vacancy on the Supreme Court based on his view of who the best person is do that job. When we're talking about a lifetime appointment on the highest court in the land, we -- we can't get distracted by partisan politics. The president's very focused on choosing someone who understands that it's their job to try to interpret the law, not advance a political agenda, and that's the criteria that the president will use.

And the president's going to put forward somebody that has extraordinary legal credentials and that he is confident could serve with honor and distinction on the Supreme Court, and that's the criteria that the president will use and that's the criteria the president would -- would use regardless of how this vacancy came about. OK?

Susan (ph)?

QUESTION:

I want to go back to U.S. drone (ph) strikes. There's a report out of the Pentagon today that a U.S. drone strike killed 158 Somalia al-Shabaab fighters. First of all, can you confirm that? Can you expand on that? And were there any innocent civilians that were also killed as well?

EARNEST:

Susan (ph), what I can tell you is that on Saturday, March 5, the United States military conducted airstrikes in Somalia against Raso Camp, a training facility al-Shabaab. As you know, al-Shabaab is an Al Qaida-affiliated terrorist organization. The fighters who were at that camp were scheduled to depart the camp. Apparently somebody's knowing on the door, there.

(LAUGHTER)

So you guys want to see if you can (inaudible)? Thank you. Maybe it's just a reminder of what my home life is like a little bit.

(LAUGHTER)

So if I seem particularly skilled at being able to block that out and answer your questions, it's because I get a lot of practice of that at home.

But back to your original question. The fighters who were scheduled to depart the camp pose an imminent threat to U.S. and African Union mission forces in Somalia. Their removal -- the removal of those terrorist fighters degrades al-Shabaab's ability to meet the group's objectives in Somalia, including recruiting new members, establishing bases and planning attacks on U.S. and (inaudible) forces.

This is a good example of how the United States military can use our resources and capabilities in partnership with forces on the ground, in this case, African Union forces, to counter extremism and protect the United States and our interests. And so this is exactly the kind of counter terrorism strategy that the president has laid out.

EARNEST:

I will just -- the last part of this is the Department of Defense is continuing to assess the results of the operation. So I can't confirm for you at this point, the number of fighters who were killed in the operation, or whether this had any impact on any civilians who may have been in the area.

I can tell you that the Department of Defense applies the highest possible standard in avoiding civilian casualties before even deciding to move forward on an operation like this. So, avoiding civilian casualties is a very, very high priority. Both for moral reasons but also because extremist organizations like al-shabab would just use the death of innocent civilians to try to recruit additional members and whip up additional anti-U.S. sentiment.

So that's why the Department of Defense goes to great lengths to avoid that.

QUESTION:

Quick clarification on that.

EARNEST:

Sure.

QUESTION:

Are you confirming that it's a drone strike, because I thought the Pentagon had put out a correct that said it was not.

EARNEST:

I'm just confirming that it was an air strike in Somalia.

(OFF-MIKE)

EARNEST:

I don't have additional information. For operational details like that, you should check with DOD. But yes, what I'm told is an air strike. OK.

QUESTION:

On another matter, has the president submitted his absentee vote ballot for the Democratic Presidential primary in Illinois. I think the deadline in March 15th.

EARNEST:

It's coming up. I don't whether or not he's filled out his ballot, but I'll work on that and see if I can get back to you on that.

QUESTION:

And finally on Nancy Reagan, the president and the First Lady, Michelle Obama, said that she had changed and redefined the role as First Lady. Can you expound on that a bit?

EARNEST:

Well, Mrs. Reagan obviously was a very important partner for her husband and the president alluded to this in his comments in the Roosevelt Room as well.

It was clear, even at the time, that the President Regan relied on her support, on her companionship but also on her judgment, even on some important issues that he was dealing with.

And I think that certainly is why so many people respected Mrs. Reagan while she lived here in the White House. But I think as historians have gone back to learn more about what transpired in the Reagan White House, they've understood that the role that she played was significant.

You know, I think that her influence and her effectiveness and her - the moral clarity of her voice, I think, is something that we all saw publicly as she advocated for research when it came to fighting Alzhemier's.

Understanding what her family had been through as she lent her credibility and her visibility and her moral clarity to being heard on that issue and understanding that if she could advocate for greater research into this field, that she could spare many other families in this country, the kind of pain that her family went through and that she even herself personally experienced.

And I think in some ways, you know, her speaking out on this issue was an illustration of the way that she was able to conduct herself, even in private. And I think that won her the admiration of a lot of Americans, Democrats and Republicans alike.

QUESTION:

Is it a model that the Obamas, as the first couple, emulate in some ways?

EARNEST:

Well, obviously, I think these kinds of interpersonal relationships I think are different for everybody. And I think it would be a gross oversimplification to say that one -- the relationship between one president and first lady is just like another.

But I think what the president alluded to this again in his comments in the Roosevelt Room where he noted that Mrs. Reagan was a supportive and unfailingly loyal companion to her husband. And President Obama admitted and acknowledged that he benefitted from that kind of -- and he continues to benefit from that kind of loyalty and support from the first lady.

EARNEST:

That was true before he was president, it certainly has been true and particularly important as he has assumed the weighty responsibilities of the presidency. But that's something that the president, I'm confident will appreciate even further in his post- presidency life.

OK? Margaret.

QUESTION:

Josh, you mentioned the president spent time on the phone this weekend with a number of senators. Can you characterize what that conversation was like? And were there Republicans that the president was calling?

Was he explaining his thinking on specific nominees or -- what was the gist of the conversation?

EARNEST:

I don't have any names to share with you. I can just tell you that there were multiple calls that the president placed, and the calls were consistent with the kinds of calls that the president has been

making over the last couple of weeks, which is having a conversation about the president's view of his constitutional responsibility to move forward with appointing someone to fill the vacancy on the Supreme Court.

The president did express an openness to suggestions from the senators about people that could be good candidates for this role. And the president laid out the criteria that he will eventually employ in choosing the best person for this job, and this the criteria that we've talked about quite a bit, you know, this focusing on interpreting the law, not advancing a political agenda, and choosing somebody that has extraordinary and unquestionable legal credentials that they can bring to this very important job.

QUESTION:

So, no names, but can you say whether there were Republicans on this small sheet?

EARNEST:

I can't say anything further than I have, which is to say that there are multiple senators that the president contacted.

QUESTION:

Was the president -- I would assume, though, that the president was trying to move the conversation forward, which would mean that he's not just talking to his own party?

EARNEST:

Well, I think you can assume that the president wanted to demonstrate his commitment to the notion of consulting with the United States Senate about this nomination.

I think the president was eager to make the case in private for what he said publicly on many occasions, which is that there is no exception in the United States Constitution for election years.

Every year that the president serves in office, the president has -- is charged with the responsibility of appointing someone to fill the vacancy on the Supreme Court.

And the Constitution is also clear that there is no exception for the United States Senate in election years, either. And that the Senate has a responsibility, even in election years, to give that person a fair hearing and a timely yes or no vote.

And the president explained that thinking as well.

QUESTION:

I take it, openness to suggestions means that the list of nominees is still a work in progress? It's not closed?

EARNEST:

Well, it's fair to say that the president is continuing to solicit people for their opinions, and that means if he hears one that he likes, then he is willing to -- or if he hears somebody that hasn't already been considered, that he is open to adding them to the list.

QUESTION:

And should we expect any news this week -- rule out today, do you want to go farther than that?

EARNEST:

I'm not going to go father than that.

QUESTION:

On the question on the drone report that Lisa Monica (ph) was laying out, can you explain why the battle grounds of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan are excluded in terms of -- to fix -- explaining the head count of both casualties and terrorists killed?

EARNEST:

I think I know the answer to that question, but let me look into it before I hazard a guess. But we'll follow up with you and get you an explanation for that.

QUESTION:

But can you explain what you think this demonstrates about the president's foreign policy?

EARNEST:

Yeah. Well, look, I think what it demonstrates is a commitment to transparency, that the president believes that being as transparent as possible, with the American public but also with people around the world about the steps that we're taking to protect the American people and our interests.

EARNEST:

It inspires confidence in our capabilities. It also inspires confidence in our ability to carry out these actions consistent with our values, and the president has spent a lot of time on the campaign trail when he was campaigning for this job, but certainly over the last seven years, talking about how living up to our values even as we fight terrorists is part of what makes America so effective in mobilizing the world to go after terrorist organizations.

Demonstrating our ability to live up to our values, even in a time of conflict, is -- is an important weapon that we have in our arsenal and the more that we can be transparent about how we conduct these operations and what the result of those operations is, only bolsters confidence in our ability to -- to do exactly that.

There are obviously going to be limitations to this, and I'm not suggesting that the president's going to be in a position to be fully transparent about every single operation that we've undertaken against -- against terrorists, and I think that's for obvious reasons. But this is an area where the president believed that our fight against terrorists and our ability to mobilize the world to counterterrorism would be more effective if we were more transparent in this area of our policy, and that's exactly what -- what he's proposing to do and what his administration will do.

QUESTION:

But it -- does quantifying the body count of the strategy of having a light foot print but hitting from the air without ground forces -- are you concerned that this opens up the administration to -- to more criticism? are you confident that these numbers are going to show that civilian casualties have actually been limited? I mean, what's your expectation about what these numbers are going to show?

EARNEST:

Well, there's certainly -- I think part of this, Margaret, is actually countering some misinformation that's out there. We do see that extremist organizations try to tell a story that's not at all accurate about the impact of our counterterrorism operations. And so by publishing the numbers and being more transparent, we can make clear that we're not just paying lip service to the idea that our policy puts in place the highest possible standard for avoiding civilian casualties when carrying out these operations. That's something that we take quite seriously.

Again, we do that for moral reasons, but also because we understand the impact that can have on our ability or I guess I should say the ability of terrorists to -- to try to recruit people to their cause. So -- so with that respect, I think it is important to put out the numbers for that reason to counter those notions and for us -- and to make clear -- to provide evidence that our commitment to preventing civilian casualties is -- is a serious one.

I think the last thing I would point out is for a decent portion of this administration and the previous one, we wouldn't even acknowledge publicly that these things were taking place. So the fact that we are now in a position on a regular routinized (ph) basis to publish the results and to quantify the totals about the impact of these operations, I do think represents substantial progress in the direction of transparency.

I -- I will continue to readily acknowledge that there are going to be limits to our ability to be transparent about all this, but there's no denying that we have moved quite a long way in the direction of transparency. And the president has only done that because he believes that it enhances our national security interest to demonstrate that we can carry out these operations consistent with our values. OK?

Mike?

QUESTION:

So just following up on that quickly, and then one other.

EARNEST:

OK.

QUESTION:

In order for those numbers, for those totals that you just talked about, to be valid, to be seen as valid and to serve the purpose of transparency that you just described, they'd have to be essentially cumulative and complete, because otherwise, you could be easily accused of cherry picking, right, picking the cases that you want to put out there. So is it your understanding that going forward, that -- that essentially, this will be a complete list? Will it include countries like Pakistan, for example?

EARNEST:

Well, I will -- it -- it...

QUESTION:

How do you -- how do you respond to the charge, if it's -- if it's not complete? If you're just doing this country, but not that country, or -- you know, these five and not those five, how do you combat the charge that you're essentially picking the ones that -- that don't have civilian casualties, and maybe -- you know, not showing the other ones? And then it sort of -- doesn't serve the purpose that you suggest.

EARNEST:

Well, I think that it does, in terms if -- well, let me just state -- state from here that I don't have a detailed sense to give you at this point about exactly what form the presentation of these numbers will take. But we'll have some more information on that...

QUESTION:

Will you have a list of countries?

EARNEST:

... soon.

QUESTION:

Can we say (ph) Pakistan?

EARNEST:

At this point, I don't want to say exactly what this report -- what these reports will look like, but we'll have more information on this soon. There will obviously be some limitations on where -- about where we can be transparent, given a variety of sensitivities, including diplomatic ones.

But -- but again, there's no denying that we have moved from even being loath to confirm that these operations take place anywhere, to not just confirming that they take place in a lot of places, but that they -- but also sort of tallying (ph) up the results.

I think that is a substantial -- that's substantial progress, and I do think that it is at least an important data point in demonstrating our commitment to the principle of avoiding civilian casualties.

I also think, Mike, there's -- that there's also a point at which there'll be some people who say, "well, the numbers that you have published are totally wrong." So there -- I acknowledge there also will be some people that we won't ever -- won't ever be able to convince.

But the president is serious about looking for ways for us to demonstrate that we can carry out these operations consistent with our values. And I think this data, when it's released, will at least buttress our ability to make that case.

QUESTION:

And then -- and then second, as one of the public faces of the administration and the master of public relations and all of that here...

EARNEST:

That's generous.

(LAUGHTER)

QUESTION:

... how -- what's your minimum amount of time that you think you need to schedule a rollout of a Supreme Court nomination...

(LAUGHTER)

... from the moment that you find out?

EARNEST:

That's a good question. I would -- probably not that much time, primarily because we -- we -- we largely know what is entailed in a -- in the rollout of a decision, even before the decision has been made about who that person is.

QUESTION:

So that planning is already underway and...

EARNEST:

So I think it's fair for you to say that, in general, that kind of planning is -- is underway. But that should not...

QUESTION:

... and it's not likely to come, say, on a state dinner night, or on a day that he's...

(LAUGHTER)

... at least some of those things that you've thought through, right?

EARNEST:

Well, I'll -- I'll allow you to draw your own conclusions about that. OK? Tara.

QUESTION:

I have a question about the drone strikes.

EARNEST:

OK.

QUESTION:

You're talking about transparency, and how the administration has become much more transparent, and there's been progress, and then there's the strike that we just heard about that -- in Somalia, with 150 people being killed.

I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit about what that means for the counterterrorism strategy, because a long time ago, the drone strikes were -- were targeted. The whole point was that you knew exactly who was being killed -- you knew the names or identifications of the people -- and now these drone strikes have gotten quite big.

EARNEST:

Well, let me just go back to one element of your question, which is I'm not able to confirm the results of the operation that are referred to in Somalia against the al-Shabaab fighters. So the Department of Defense can confirm the outcome here.

The reason I'm saying that is just that, when I walk out here, I didn't know that they would be able -- they would be in a position to confirm the total numbers, so I don't know if they've done that or not.

Maybe they have, and if they have, then you should go based on what they have given you, but I can't confirm that independently. More generally, the president has unfortunately had a lot of opportunities to talk about our counterterrorism strategy.

EARNEST:

And we have seen the nature of the threat evolve from one that was focused in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region emanating from core al-Qaida. And because of the operations and sustained commitment that this president made to decimating core al-Qaida, the threat has changed.

That threat is one that the president continues to take seriously, but it also means that we have different kind of terrorist groups operating in different parts of the world. And that's why the president has focused on a counterterrorism strategy that supports local partners. We want local partners on the ground that can combat these extremists in their midst. That's the way that we're going to be most effective, and there are any number of things that the United States and other -- and our allies can do to support those local efforts.

In some cases, that means carrying out airstrikes, in other cases, that means training and equipping local fighters, in other cases, that means sharing valuable intelligence, in other cases, that means doing important diplomatic work that can help them -- that can help a variety of countries work together to address the terrorist threat that's emanating from their region. In other cases, it may mean providing economic assistance to a country to allow them to enhance and strengthen their economy and potentially remove at least one recruiting tool that extremist organizations may be missing.

But all of this is focused on the idea that while the United States has robust capabilities and the president will not hesitate to order the use of those capabilities to protect the American people, at the same time, we're going to be more effective over the long term if we build capacity in these countries for individuals and security forces in these countries to fight for their own countries. And they can certainly count on the United States to support them as they do that. OK, yes sir.

QUESTION:

(OFF-MIKE) of Greece. Thank you, Josh, for...

EARNEST:

Nice to see you.

QUESTION:

...this question is about the refugee crisis in Europe. Today, the European leaders are convening in Brussels in order to deal with this crisis. I'm sure that you know that Greece is taking into its burden -- into its -- shoulders the burden of this -- of this crisis. A lot of -- thousands of refugees are stuck in Greece right now. I'd like to know what is the president's view about this.

We are the (inaudible) right now in Greece, and whether he's concerned and whether he's encouraging the other European states closing their borders and not sharing the burden of responsibility in the spirit of solidarity, actually, and whether or not is he planning to have, like, any telephone conversation with the Greek prime minister because I have noticed that he has spoken with other European leaders but not with the Greek prime minister Mr. Tsipras.

EARNEST:

I'm not aware of any calls with Mr. -- with Prime Minister Tsipras that are coming up. Obviously, the president has had multiple opportunities to talk to Prime Minister Tsipras on a range of issues.

A couple of things come to mind here. The first is there's no denying that the flow of migrants from -- largely from Iraq and Syria has strained the solidarity of the European Union. This has been a very difficult challenge not just for Greece, but for other countries in the EU. And one of the things that we -- well so the -- unity of that union will be put to the test, and we certainly believe that Europe will be able to better respond to this threat if they continue to work together to confront it.

EARNEST:

Let me give you one example of how that's being done. There are reports that NATO has become a dedicated resources to counter human smuggling and human trafficking in the Aegean.

That certainly is a welcome development and is an indication of other countries throughout Europe devoting resources to try to address this big challenge.

The other thing that I'll say and this sort of goes back to something that's been the focus of our efforts for quite some time here, that we have long acknowledged that the political failure of the Assad regime inside of Syria has had a verity of negative consequences on the region.

We've certainly seen Syria become a war-torn country. We've seen extremists establish a foothold in their country. And they have used that foothold to try to menace other countries, not just Iraq. But even, you know, some extremists that are carrying out operations in Europe.

We know that there are ties from those who carried out the Paris attacks back in November, to extremists in Syria. So, that's why this administration has been so focused on -- well, to say nothing of the significant numbers of Syrians who have fled their homes and fled their country and sought refuge in Europe.

The only way to address this ultimately and finally, is to try to address the political chaos and turmoil and failures inside of Syria. And that's why the United States has played a leading role in the diplomatic effort to try to bring about the political transition inside of Syria that is long over due.

QUESTION:

Would the president like to see European leaders doing something more, faster and better dealing with this problem?

EARNEST:

Well, obviously, you know, this is going to be a big challenge for Europe. The United States will support the European Union and our many close allies in Europe as they confront this threat, but ultimately this is something that will be their responsibility.

OK? All right?

Goyle (ph), I'll give you the last one.

QUESTION:

Thank you. There's a quick one. Afghan-U.S. relations are concerned that they are on the move (ph) and under President Obama and Prime Minister Modi and as far as the U.S. and Indian consulate in the American communities, considering they also are -- they also have the same views.

But is there simply, as far as a H1B visa, few is concerned with between the U.S. and India, and those are affecting thousands jobs in the U.S. and hundreds of Indian companies are doing business here.

Now they are saying that this huge (ph) net cost of probably after (ph) three (ph) originals (ph) are concerned. Are you or the president aware of this durgent (ph) case in Derukio (ph) as far as the H1B visa, as far as India is concerned, against the U.S.?

EARNEST:

Well Goyle, I have to admit, I'm not aware of this specific situation, so why don't I have somebody -- one of my colleagues follow up with you on it.

QUESTION:

Secretary, according to the New England (ph) post, research (ph) links (ph) Pakistan had here, of course U.S.-Pakistan started (ph) dial-up (ph). What the accordion (ph) say that Pakistan may sell nuclear plan to Saudi Arabia. Is there anything that White House knows about this?

EARNEST:

Sorry Goyle (ph). I haven't seen that report either, but let's see if we can have somebody follow up with you on it.

QUESTION:

Thanks.

EARNEST:

OK? I'm sorry I didn't have better answers for you today. OK?

QUESTION:

Thank you.

EARNEST:

Everybody have a good day, I'll see you tomorrow.